AND STILL IS OURS TODAY

Thanksgiving Day, November 28, 1985, 11:00 a.m.

Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

"Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God..."
--I Thessalonians 5:18 (RSV)

Scripture

Psalm 100
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
I Thessalonians 5:12-18

An article in the Sunday Times reported once again that tourists are often disappointed with Plymouth Rock. "I don't know what people see in it," said a 15 year-old from California. Another visitor, from North Carolina, said: "Now, I can understand that 350 years can create a lot of erosion. But friends, I've turned over bigger rocks than this mowing grass." People expect something of heroic proportions apparently. The Rock, which draws thousands of visitors around Thanksgiving each year, evokes many responses, the most common of which is disappointment. (New York Times, 11/24/85)

"The plantation itself," the article went on, "is a place where the popular imagination clashes with historical reality." Visitors are annoyed to be told that their mental picture of the Pilgrims is a product of the fantasies of the Victorian era, not historic reality.

It is the purpose of a holiday to remind us of, and to recapture, the past. A birthday is a time to hear about and remember the day you were born, to hear stories about how it was on that day. We reclaim our identity when we celebrate the past. We reaffirm who we are -- we say "I am who I am because that is who I used to be." Some of that ought to happen for each of us individually on Thanksgiving.

But there is a long distance to be covered. The original celebration was more than 350 years ago and in a real sense the event we remember itself was based on a tradition some 3,000 years older.

Our task then is to close the distance a bit: to reaffirm who we are today by recalling who we were as a people.

The first Thanksgiving, or at least the first observed by European people -- native Americans had been thanking and revering the earth and the spirit of life for a millennium prior to their arrival -- the Thanksgiving that happened in

1621 -- was observed by people of the Bible. The Pilgrims were people of The Book -- they knew the Old Testament and the three major festivals: Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles -- known also as the Feast of Weeks or the Feast of Booths. It is this one which was the model for Thanksgiving as the Pilgrims observed it. Harvest festivals were not unique to Israel. The land of Canaan, into which they moved after the Exodus and the decades of wilderness wandering, was an agrarian culture, rich in the traditions and rituals of fertility religion. The people of Israel, however, added a new dimension to the existing harvest rites. At the conclusion of the harvest, all work ceased. Each family constructed and lived temporarily in a small booth or tabernacle made of branches. The idea was to remember and to reclaim the past, in the words of the Book of Leviticus: "that your generation may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of Egypt." (Lev. 2:23) That is the uniqueness of Israel's Thanksgiving. The God of creation is also the God of history. The Lord of the earth is also the Lord of his people who delivered them in the past. Then came the feast, the communal meal to which were invited the poor and the travelers. Finally, individual offerings were made, and as the cereal or animal was offered the individual recited a moving confession of faith claiming his own past and God's mighty act of deliverence: "A wandering Aramean was my father and he went down into Egypt...and the Lord heard our voice and brought us out of Egypt...into this land...flowing with milk and honey." (Deut. 26:5-9)

That is the historical root of Thanksgiving and it is what the Pilgrims were reclaiming and reenacting. They read their own story, their own names, in that older story. God is thanked for the harvest. But the act of thanksgiving includes an affirmation of who they are and gratitude to God for the events in the distant past that gave them their identity. The Pilgrims remembered Exodus, Deliverance, Wilderness, Conguest -- so we recall the Mayflower.

We have come such a long way from all of that. The fact of the matter is that most of us have experienced nothing but prosperity. The majority of Americans are under 35, born since 1950. That means they know about World War II rationing as an item of historical interest; and the Great Depression as an artifact from another generation. The sociologists tell us that for people who lived through it, or were born near to it, the Depression is the single most influential factor in the person's value system and world view. That is the reason, I suppose, why one of the noblest of parental responsibilities is to remind your children of how easy they have it and how difficult it was for you..."When asked to drive them to school because it's raining, "Why, we didn't have a car when I was your age, and I used to walk five miles to school in zero weather through a foot of snow and think it was fun! Or, when they complain that they have to eat roast beef again, "Why, when I was your age we only ate meat like that once a month!" or "I didn't know beef came in a solid state till I was 30."...etc, etc, ad nauseam... Most Americans alive today have come of age and are coming of age in a time characterized by the longest period of sustained economic growth the world has ever known. Not all are in on it, to be sure. Poverty is with us and in a distressing way becoming worse, more entrenched, more institutionalized for an increasing percentage of our population in what looks like a permanent underclass... immune from the best Adam Smith can offer. Nevertheless, many are able today to

have -- almost instantaneously -- what their parents spent most of their lives trying to build, earn and accumulate, and their grandparents never achieved. We have come a long way.

In addition, we have become urbanized and industrialized. Very few of us know much at first-hand about harvests. Sixty years ago, the late Reinhold Niebuhr was a pastor in Detroit. After preaching at a Union Thanksgiving Service he wondered in his diary "if it is possible to have an honest Thanksgiving Celebration in an industrial civilization."

Niebuhr was right. The harvest may or may not be in -- most of us don't really know. Our forebearers may have heaved great sighs of relief and gratitude when the barns were full for winter. You and I simply assume that they are. Our closest contact with the process by which they get full begins and ends at the supermarket cash register, and our sighs of relief are precipitated not by the fact that there is bread to eat today, but by the fact that the price has not risen again.

We have come a long way. Our shelves are full. Our Thanksgiving gratitude focuses on our abundance, our wealth of food, clothing, shelter, conveniences and life enhancing services.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony did its celebrating, on the other hand, in the midst of what was a near disaster. Half of them were dead: all but three families had lost someone. The barley they planted had done very poorly: the peas had failed altogether. Can you imagine the English without peas? It was the corn, given to them by the Indians, which made life possible: enough to provide two pounds per person per day through that second winter. It was something less than a celebration of abundance or nature's kindness because nature had not been kind. It was something more than that actually. As Israel before them had remembered God the deliverer in the middle of a harvest festival, so these saints celebrated God's good presence, the strength they had been given: the strong hand they had felt leading them: the assurance that no matter what happened they were not abandoned on the edge of the wilderness. Even when they were burying their loved ones, God stood beside them. Governor Bradford wrote in his journal: "The whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue. If they looked behind them there was the mighty ocean -- What could now sustain them but the spirit of God and his grace? May not and ought not the children of these fathers say, 'Our fathers came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness: but they cried unto the Lord and he heard their voices, and looked on their adversity. Let them therefore praise the Lord, because he is good and his mercies endure forever.'"

That is what is unique about an American Thanksgiving and it is part of our identity which we need to recapture. Our abundance of food and comfort and clothing and health ought to call gratitude out of us. But more important, God is to be thanked for being God and for being with us. It is a gratitude that lives loosely with external circumstances. To the early church in Thessalonica St. Paul wrote, in the midst of dangerous and not very hopeful events, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Goodspeed translates it even more plainly, "Thank God whatever happens."

The trouble with focusing too exclusively on full larders or good health or prosperous families is that sometime the larder is empty and health is failing and your son just lost his job. It is then that people of God recover their identity and discover again that God's goodness is really not adequately defined by the success of the bean crop.

Thank God whatever happens... Thanksgiving is a time to affirm an important part of our heritage -- a theology of gratitude to a God whose greatest gift to us is himself: the theology of joyful thanks for God's faithfulness and love.

It is time today to do some quiet accounting: to take stock of our lives and all the priceless gifts we have been given: the people who care for us and love us and make life rich and meaningful: the air we breathe and the world that so marvelously sustains us: a nation that has nurtured us with freedom and given us a history of sacrifice and purposefulness and justice: a church that has helped us to believe and has stood with us in good times and in bad. But most of all it is time to reflect on the goodness of the God who has been with us in the past, who loved us into life, who has taken us by the hand -- even when we were not aware of it, and led us along our way: a God who walked with Pilgrim fathers and mothers, whose firmest promise is that he will be with us in the future and who, happily, "still is ours today."

Among theologians it has always been said that the real test of a theological affirmation is neither its irrefutable logic, nor its eloquence, but simply whether or not it can be sung. Our hymns of gratitude are our strongest, and there is one in particular which gathers up all I have been trying to say and which celebrates our faith more eloquently than a library of doctrines...

Now thank we all our God
With heart and hand and voices,...
Who wondrous things hath done,
For whom his world rejoices:...
Who from our mother's arms
Hath blest us on our way
With countless gifts of love
And still is ours today.

Amen.